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ABSTRACT

Redefining the federal government's role in kindergarten through grade 12 education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is designed to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. The act is based on four principles, the first of which is stronger accountability for results, entailing creation of standards against which student progress and achievement will be measured by annual state tests. This booklet explains the roles of these new state tests in improving student achievement and addresses some of the misunderstandings about the changes to come. Following an introduction, the first part of the booklet provides a rationale for measuring student progress, noting that each state retains the responsibility for deciding what their students should learn in each grade as well as devising assessments aligned to curriculum. The second part of the booklet explores myths and realities about testing, noting that testing is intended to establish benchmarks rather than narrow the curriculum, and that a well-designed evaluation system accommodates special needs. (HTH)

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Testing for Results

*Helping Families, Schools and
Communities Understand and
Improve Student Achievement*

Office of the Under Secretary
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U.S. Department of Education

Rod Paige

Secretary

Office of the Under Secretary

Eugene W. Hickok

Under Secretary

Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs

Laurie M. Rich

Assistant Secretary

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Helping Families, Schools and Communities Understand and Improve Student Achievement

Introduction

On Jan. 8, 2002, President Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. This new law embodies his education reform plan and is the most sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) since it was enacted in 1965. The new law redefines the federal government's role in kindergarten-through-grade-12 education. Designed to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers, the new law will change the culture of America's schools so that they define their success in terms of student achievement and invest in the achievement of every child. The act is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work.

The first principle of accountability for results involves the creation of standards in each state for what a child should know and learn in reading and math in grades three through eight. With those standards in place, student progress and achievement will be measured according to state tests designed to match those state standards and given to every child, every year.

The new law will empower parents, citizens, educators, administrators and policymakers with data from those annual assessments. The data will be available in annual report cards on school performance

and on statewide progress. They will give parents information about the quality of their children's schools, the qualifications of their teachers, and their children's progress in key subjects. The tests will give teachers and principals information about how each child is performing and help them to diagnose and meet the needs of each student. They will also give policymakers and leaders at the state and local levels critical information about which schools and school districts are succeeding and why, so this success may be expanded and any failures addressed.

Still there are many misconceptions about these annual assessments. The following will explain the role of these new state tests in improving student achievement and address some of the misunderstandings about the changes to come.

The U.S. Department of Education wants to be a partner with states and school districts and a resource for families and community members. If you have additional questions about testing or about other features of the new law, we encourage you to visit our Web site at www.ed.gov or call us at 1-800-USA-LEARN.

Measuring Student Progress

When President Bush delivered his education reform proposal to Congress last year, he said, "We must confront the scandal of illiteracy in America, seen most clearly in high-poverty schools, where nearly 70 percent of fourth-graders are unable to read at a basic level." The National Assessment of Educational Progress has found that average reading scores for 17-year-olds have not improved since the 1970s. In 1998, 60 percent of 12th-graders were reading below proficiency. Perhaps even more distressing is that this trend of low performance by our schools reaches back more than two decades, during which time the taxpayers have spent \$125 billion on elementary and secondary education. For years we have been measuring success in schools by how many dollars we spend, how many computers and textbooks we purchase, and how many promising programs we create. Too many of our nation's schools have not measured up because our measures for success have been ineffective. That's why under the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, which passed the U.S. Congress with strong bipartisan support, states are required to use a method of measuring student progress that teachers use in their classrooms every day—testing.

We need to test children on their academic knowledge and skills for the same reason we take them to the dentist to see whether or not they have cavities—because we need to know. As caring adults, we want the children in our lives to have healthy teeth because we know that their teeth have to last a long time. If the dentist finds that their teeth are not healthy, then we get the cavity filled, and we teach them how to brush

correctly, to use dental floss and avoid too much sugar. Children don't like going to the dentist, and we don't like the expense, but we do it because it's the right thing to do.

The same is true of annual academic assessment. Because education lasts children a lifetime, leads to their financial security, and gives them a chance to pursue the American dream, we want to know which children are catching on and which ones are not. Then we want to take the ones who are not and teach them how to read, how to add, how to study, and how to learn.

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, each state retains the responsibility to decide what their students should learn in each grade. States are to develop rigorous academic standards (most are already doing this), and those standards should drive the curriculum, which, in turn, must drive instruction. Annual statewide assessments will be aligned with the curriculum to provide an external, independent measure of what is going on in the classroom, as well as an early indicator showing when a student needs extra help. The results of these tests can be used to direct resources, such as after-school tutoring or summer school, toward those who are falling behind. Extra help is not a punishment. It is a responsibility that enables students to catch up and to increase their chances of success during the next school year.

Cheryl Krehbiel, a fourth-grade teacher at Broad Acres Elementary School in Silver Spring, Md., said, "Clearly students can't learn what I don't teach them. Having the courage to learn about my own professional needs from the [testing] data is a lesson that I can't

afford to miss.” Aside from taking an honest look at their own skills, teachers can also use test results at the beginning of the year to find out where a new class of students stands. For example, teachers, finding that many of their students are weak in math, can arrange the classroom schedule to include extra time for math instruction. If, as a parent, you know that your child’s school has had trouble in the past teaching grammar to third-graders, you can pay extra attention to your third-grader’s progress in this area. Teachers and principals can look at district performance data to see which schools have the highest scores in math and encourage other schools to replicate the successful teaching practices from those schools.

Successful public schools are not only in the best interest of students, parents and teachers, but they are also important to a strong economy and viable communities. Susan Traiman, director of education initiatives at the Business Roundtable, said, “The business community sees testing as one of the most important tools for improvement It’s very important to find out how you’re doing, face up to any problems, and then have a proactive approach to doing something about it There will be consequences, and most of the consequences are to get folks extra help, to give them tools to succeed.”

Employers need to have confidence that a high school diploma means something, that a graduate has the knowledge and skills needed to succeed. Members of a community need to have confidence that with each high school graduation, a new group of educated, productive citizens is on its way to taking on important roles in society.

Life is full of exams, judgment calls and forms. By the time most people reach the age of 20 they have already taken a driving test, filled out a credit card application, signed a lease, and submitted a W-2 form to the IRS. None of these activities is fun. All can be stressful, but they are all part of a life that we accept. In order to provide a quality education for every child in America, we must first test them to find out which children are not learning at the level or pace necessary to keep up.

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige said, "Anyone who opposes annual testing of children is an apologist for a broken system of education that dismisses certain children and classes of children as unteachable." When we do not know whether or not a child is learning, how will we ever provide that child with a quality education? President Bush and the U.S. Congress have challenged educators to set high standards and hold students, schools and districts accountable for results. The stakes are too high to not do a good job of measuring student performance.

Myths and Realities about Testing

Testing students is nothing new. Good teachers have always tried to measure how well their students are learning and used tests to recognize student achievement and uncover learning problems. Without measuring student achievement, the only criteria governing student grades and promotion would be behavior in class and attendance.

Testing has only recently emerged as an issue because taxpayers are asking more and tougher questions about the performance of their schools and students and seeking more and better information about school and student performance. The results of teacher-designed exams and a wide assortment of "off the shelf" tests are helpful, but they shed little light on school performance and academic program impact. A strong accountability system composed of annual testing keyed to rigorous academic standards and a challenging curriculum taught in the school provides the sort of information needed to determine what works, what doesn't, how well students are achieving, and what to do to help those who need help.

As the use of standardized tests increases and parents are better able to understand the dimensions of school and student performance, there will be greater pressure on low-performing schools to improve. This worries those who might feel that pressure and so they have attempted to undermine the accountability movement by challenging the usefulness of testing. The once common-sense assumption that testing is part of learning is being challenged by myths created to undermine the effort to improve America's schools.

Testing Myth

Testing suppresses teaching and learning.

The Reality

A teacher is effective when a student learns. It is impossible to determine teaching effectiveness without determining learning results. A teacher can present a great lesson, but if the students do not understand, then the lesson has no value.

Testing students on what they are taught has always been a part of teaching. The process of testing students on what they are learning over a course of instruction is universally understood and appreciated. Testing helps teachers understand what their students need, helps students understand what they need to learn, and helps parents understand how they might help their children.

Testing Myth

Testing narrows the curriculum by rewarding test-taking skills.

The Reality

Surely a quality education reaches far beyond the confines of any specific test. But annual testing is important. It establishes benchmarks of student knowledge. Tests keyed to rigorous state academic standards provide a measure of student knowledge and skills. If the academic standards are truly rigorous, student learning will be as well.

Testing Myth

Testing promotes "teaching to the test."

The Reality

Those who say testing gets in the way of learning frame a false dichotomy. Testing is part of teaching and learning. Gifted and inspiring teachers use tests to motivate students as well as to assess to their learning. Effective teachers recognize the value of testing and know how to employ testing in instruction.

Testing Myth

Testing does not measure what a student should know.

The Reality

In a strong accountability system, the curriculum is driven by academic standards, and annual tests are tied to the standards. With this in place, tests not only measure what a student should know but also provide a good indication of whether or not the student has indeed learned the material covered by the curriculum.

Testing Myth

Annual testing places too much emphasis on a single exam.

The Reality

Most Americans see the importance of visiting a physician for an annual checkup. They also recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and monitoring their health throughout the year. Annual testing provides important information on student achievement, so teachers and parents may determine how best to improve student performance and diagnose problems that might be associated with poor performance. If a single annual test were the only device a teacher used to gauge student performance, it would indeed be inadequate. Effective teachers assess their students in various ways during the school year. As they do this, they not only monitor student achievement but also help to ensure that their students will excel on annual tests.

Testing Myth

Testing discriminates against different styles of test takers.

The Reality

A well-designed evaluation system accommodates special needs. Evaluating the performance of all students is not easy. Some students do have trouble taking tests. Some students score poorly for reasons outside the classroom. A good evaluation system will reflect the diversity of student learning and achievement.

Testing Myth

Testing provides little helpful information and accomplishes nothing.

The Reality

A good evaluation system provides invaluable information that can inform instruction and curriculum, help diagnose achievement problems and inform decision making in the classroom, the school, the district and the home. Testing is about providing useful information and it can change the way schools operate.

Testing Myth

Testing hurts the poor and people of color.

The Reality

The fact is that millions of young people—many from low-income families, many people of color—are being left behind every day because of low expectations for their academic achievement and a lack of adequate measures to determine academic achievement. These are the students who stand to benefit the most from annual testing. A strong accountability system will make it impossible to ignore achievement gaps where they exist. Moreover, where testing systems are now in place, low-income and minority students are indeed excelling. A recent study reports that there are more than 4,500 high-poverty and high-minority schools nationwide that scored in the top one-third on the state tests.

Testing Myth

Testing will increase dropout rates and create physical and emotional illness in children.

The Reality

The overwhelming majority of students who drop out of school do so because they are frustrated. They cannot read or write or learn. Testing helps with the early identification of students who are having trouble learning so they may get the services they need to succeed. Testing, in any form, does sometimes cause anxiety. Effective teachers understand this and help students prepare for it. Testing is a part of life, and young people need to be equipped to deal with it. ■



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